

# **My Brilliant Friend Study Guide**

## **My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante**

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# Plot Summary

"My Brilliant Friend" is a story of friendship—humbling, raw, human friendship—amid the backdrop of a poor section of postwar Naples, Italy.

The novel opens with a flashback: the narrator is Elena, a woman in her mid-60s, looking back on her six-decade friendship with Lila Cerullo. The girls meet at age six in their poor Naples neighborhood. They immediately bond over school and common hatred for the neighborhood 'ogre,' Don Achille.

As the girls grow older, they compete in all things. Elena was a good student, but Lila better. However, at the end of elementary school, Lila is unable to continue because her parents won't pay for it, but Elena does. Lila's father is a shoemaker, and Elena's is a porter in a Naples hotel. Without Lila to compete with, she continues through school with success. At times she needs Lila's help, and at times she is carried by her own intelligence and flair for writing.

The girls reach adolescence with all of the normal trappings: insecurities, varying levels of self-confidence, and crushes on the local boys. By age thirteen, Lila has developed into the beauty of the neighborhood. Elena, too, longs to be pretty and finds as many ways as she can to match Lila's success.

The goal for both girls is to rise above their birth and leave 'the neighborhood,' the area where families have lived for generations and are at the whim of the Solara family. Lila, who is brilliant but cannot go to school, throws all of her energy into a way out: she and her brother Rino design and hand-make a pair of shoes that they hope to mass market and sell with the Cerullo name. The shoes become her focus and obsession for more than a year. All of her fierceness and intelligence is poured into the project. Meanwhile, Elena excels at school, with some help from Lila in Latin and Greek.

When Elena reaches the age for high school, she is promoted and encouraged to attend. When she has the upper hand, Lila has the lower, and vice versa. Elena is an honored student, and Lila is the prettiest girl around, the goal of most of the young men in the neighborhood. Elena fills her time with several empty relationships to try to keep pace with Lila's string of admirers. Although her heart belongs to Nino Sarratore, the son of the local poet and rumored lecher, she settles for a few neighborhood boys that help her feel loved and wanted.

The girls turn fourteen, then fifteen, in this tumultuous period. Marcello Solara, the son of the new 'ogre' of the neighborhood, courts Lila ruthlessly with his money and power, and she resists him against her family's will. Elena goes away for a summer to an island in the sea, becoming strong, confident, and beautiful. The Sarratores are there as well; Nino kisses her, and the beauty of the moment is lost when his father sexually assaults her.



Upon Elena's return from the beach, she finds Lila fending off the interest of Stefano Caracci, the grocer, one of the wealthiest young men in the neighborhood, competition for the Solaras' influence. She walks a tightrope between these two young men, finally throwing Marcello over and choosing Stefano, who agrees to invest in an expansion of her father's shoe business.

During their engagement, Lila becomes even more beautiful because of Stefano's wealth. The locals love and hate her with their envy. Elena is caught in the same trap, and is also trying to deal with own feelings of inadequacy and pressure to leave the neighborhood. The novel ends on a cliffhanger, at Lila's and Stefano's wedding. They are sixteen years old: Elena has two years left of high school, and is desperate to leave and elevate herself above the 'plebs' among whom she was born. Lila walks with feigned boldness into her marriage, finding at the last minute that her husband Stefano has sold out to the hated Solara family.



# Prologue: 1-3

## Summary

The Prologue and Chapter 1 begin sixty years from the beginning of the story, when Elena and Lila are elderly women, and Lila's son, Rino, calls Elena to report that his mother is missing. In a very few sentences the reader learns that these women are long friends, that Elena lives in Turin, and that Lila has never left Naples. Elena advises Rino to leave his mother alone and NOT to search for her, which is what she would prefer.

In Chapter 2, Elena explains who Lila is, and that thirty years before, she reported to Elena that she would like to walk out of her life and leave everything behind. To actually, literally, leave the world and vanish all traces of herself in the process.

In Chapter 3, Elena searches through her belongings and finds nothing of Lila's, not a photo or memento to signify the years of friendship. In this, she has played into Lila's plans to leave nothing behind. Elena calls Rino, asking if he has looked in his mother's closet. He does, and finds nothing that belongs to his mother. Promising to continue his search, he calls back two days later, reporting that she has even cut herself out of their photographs. Elena ponders that Lila, at the age of 66, is attempting to erase her entire life. Angered, Elena sits at her computer to write their life story.

## Analysis

In these three short chapters, the author does a masterful job of sharing a bulk of information in a few short words. The women are long friends, Lila has a son, Lila has stayed in Naples while Elena has moved on, Lila does a poor job of keeping in touch, and most significantly, she has always wished to erase herself from earth, and just at the end of the prologue, appears to have done so.

Another interesting thing to note in the prologue is how callously Elena treats Lila's son Rino. For a woman who is purported to be his mother's best friend, Elena is bordering on rude and harsh in her treatment of his fears. He asks if he can come stay with her and she is firm in her response of no. This novel is the first in a trilogy, and this first glimpse of Rino the son and his relationship with the two women promises some major drama in the words to come.

The last interesting note is that, far from being worried for her friend, when Elena sits at the computer to write their story, she thinks to herself, "We'll see who wins this time," again promising a long story of competition between the two women.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Elena say that if she called Lila Raffaella, the friendship would be over?



## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Elena impatient with Rino?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Elena say, at the end of Chapter Three, that she is angry?

## **Vocabulary**

awkward, spendthrift, desperation, repulsed, unwillingly, arouse, melancholy, agitated



# Childhood: 1-6

## Summary

Lila and Elena meet at the age of six, when they decide to visit Don Achille's apartment. Don Achille Carracci is the mythical, feared, head of the neighborhood in 1958 Naples, Italy. He is forbidden and it is a fearful thing, but the girls walk up the steps one at a time, towards his apartment. In the beginning of Chapter 2, Elena explains why they are making such a treacherous trip. They had been playing dolls in the courtyard, near each other more than together, not talking, and as they are playing, Lila shoves Elena's doll through the grate in the street, into the sewer below.

In Chapter 3, Elena explains that she always knew who Lila was: she knew her in school, in Maestra Oliviero's class, where Elena always did good work, but Lila was very poorly behaved. What's worse, when the teacher attempted to punish Lila, she never seemed to fear the punishment, and even threw something at the teacher, causing her to fall and strike her head. Lila was always very determined at whatever she was doing, whether it was good or bad. Elena recalls later in their friendship, as the girls were walking along the railroad tracks, that Enzo, the son of the grocery cart attendant, threw rocks at them. Lila in turn threw them back, and actually struck Enzo in the calf and drawing blood. This she did with complete calm.

In Chapter 4, Elena returns to the story of Don Achille, how he was the most hated and feared man in the neighborhood, but as children, they didn't understand why. They only knew there was a terrible past of which he was the author. There were rumors of his viciousness and his enemies, but the children only knew that the stories lie somewhere in the 'before.' As the early section goes on to Chapter 5, Elena relates the story of Melina Cappuccio, who was related to Lila's mother, Nunzia. Melina was a neighbor to Elena's family, and was a tragic figure in the neighborhood. Widowed and left with several children, she relied on the neighborhood, particularly the attentions of Donato Sarratore, a rail worker who found her son Antonio an apprenticeship. Donato himself was a poet and nobody saw any wrongdoing in his help towards the widow, but as his attention increased and Melina developed an attachment to him, his wife Lidia publicly shamed Melina and turned the neighborhood against her. This, also, happened in the 'before,' but Lila was always very sensitive to the plight of Melina, and Donato Sarratore himself became a sort of mysterious figure.

In Chapter 6, the narration returns to the schoolroom, and Lila's outrageous behavior, when the teacher calls Nunzia Cerullo to school not to harass the family concerning Lila's behavior, but to praise the girl, who had apparently, since the age of three, taught herself to read and to write.



## Analysis

These first six chapters jump around in the timeline of the neighborhood, but serve to lay a foundation for the friendship between Lila and Elena. The author uses this section to give a short history of the neighborhood as well as paint a broad picture of the girls' personalities.

Don Achille favors heavily in the story more as a mystery than as an actual character. When he is killed about halfway through the story, his absence creates a vacuum into which two competing families—his own and the Solara family—compete for dominance over the neighborhood. Lila is caught in this struggle for power, as she will eventually be the most beautiful and desired girl in the neighborhood.

But for the early years, at age six, the narrative paints Lila as a headstrong girl with little care for violence or the difference between right and wrong. However, in the story of Melina, the wronged and heartbroken widow, the author paints a sensitive picture of Lila, who actually cares deeply for the mistreatment of those who can't help themselves. For adults such as her teacher, and for bullies in the streets, Lila has no care for safety and throws rocks at either, but her heart aches for her poorly treated relation.

The section ends with the author foreshadowing what will become a controlling issue in the early part of the relationship between Elena and Lila: Lila, it seems, is a self-taught genius. Far from the trouble and punishment her classmates expect her to undergo, Lila excels at school and earns her teacher's favor, which sets up a level of competition between the girls that will last throughout the entire story.

## Discussion Question 1

Did Donato Sarratore do anything inappropriate towards Melina?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did Enzo the grocery boy respect Lila after their fight by the embankment?

## Discussion Question 3

Why don't the children understand the danger of Don Achille?

## Vocabulary

challenging, manhole, expose, interrogate, treacherously, modified, dialect, explicit, obscurity, deliberately, fundamental, impressed, terrorized, festered, lathe





# Childhood: 7-12

## Summary

In Chapter 7, the author introduces Rino, Lila's older brother. True to his character, the reader's first glimpse of Rino is him claiming credit for his sister's early reading skills that she must have borrowed his books to learn so well. In truth, Rino is a less-intelligent version of his sister, six years older, and is destined to work in the shoe shop at an early age.

Finding that Lila can read dropped a sort of bomb on Elena's school life. To date, school is her place: a place to feel successful and safe and to excel at pleasing adults. At home, Elena finds her father easy to please, but not her mother, who is a hard and difficult woman with a damaged leg and a lazy eye. Elena's teacher, however, is always willing to be pleased with the girl; but with the discovery of Lila's talents, Elena feels this position with the teacher threatened.

In Chapter 8, Elena's description of her constant unfavorable comparison to Lila continues. Even at that young age, Lila holds a kind of spell over her classmates. She is brilliant, and she is feared. At the annual school competition between the two brightest students, Lila was beyond reach; what's more, her appearance was so slovenly compared to her peers that it felt purposeful. People didn't know what to do with her. When the girls were in second grade, they were put against the two smartest boys in the fourth grade. One of them was Enzo, the boy who threw rocks at Lila, and she defeated him. The other boy in the competition is Alfonso Caracci, the son of Don Achille.

When Chapter 9 opens, the author has returned to recounting the event with Enzo and Lila and the rocks—how they each wounded one another; each drew blood. The chapter goes on to describe the violent aftermath of the academic competition: Alfonso's older brother Stefano threatened Lila, and was in turn threatened by Lila's brother Rino. Enzo was also attacked, and in the end, most of the neighborhood apologized to Don Achille out of habit. After Lila's and Enzo's rock battle, the feuding ended.

In Chapter 10, the author returns to the first scene, in which the girls are preparing to enter Don Achille's apartment. They are doing this because one day in the courtyard, while playing with their dolls, Lila pushed Elena's doll down through the grate that led to the cellar of the apartment building. As they entered the cellar together to go after the dolls, they saw a figure down in the dark that resembled Don Achille: he took the dolls and disappeared.

In Chapter 11, the girls make haphazard plans to retrieve their dolls. One day Elena is on her way to school and is stopped by Nino Sarratore, a boy two years older, on whom she has an enormous crush. Nino tells her he wants to marry her when they grow up, and in spite of herself she says no. Soon after, the entire Sarratore family leave the



neighborhood. In Chapter 12, Enzo doesn't precisely tell Lila that he loves her, but he does give her a bag of apples. She refuses them and he walks away, but after he's gone she takes them back to her home.

## Analysis

The author does some amount of jumping around in these early chapters, not keeping to a linear storyline. Here the author is attempting to give the reader a broad overview of the importance pieces of the story. In the proceeding chapters that focus on the adolescent years, the events will fall almost exclusively in a chronological order. However, for the early years, it is important that the reader sees the big picture.

School, where the girls meet, will remain important throughout the course of the story. The author foreshadows the long-standing issue that Lila is a prodigy and has the edge on Elena—this will cause envy and strife for the course of the story. Lila, when the teacher learns of her brilliance, supplants Elena's position as teacher's favorite, and this will be the pattern for the next ten years.

Elena's mother is first mentioned in these chapters. An overworked, disfigured woman, Elena always feels herself to be an inconvenience to her mother. While Elena gets along well with her father, she always feels at odds with her mother, and can't please her. The author uses the mother's physical ailments to help display her uneven and disfigured character. Whenever Elena mentions her mother in the story, she reminds the reader of her mother's dragging leg, of her lazy eye, and the reader's discomfort is extended to the mother's character.

Also in these chapters the author lays the groundwork for another vital characteristic of the neighborhood: feuds. Because of the annual end of school academic competition, because none of the children wanted to defeat Don Achille's son on purpose, but Lila eventually wins, violence springs up in the neighborhood, and bounces from family to family until Lila's father is forced to apologize for Don Achille, and he doesn't even know what's he's apologizing for.

The last key event in these chapters is the establishment of Elena's never-ending crush on Nino Sarratore. Here he makes a declaration—from a 10-year-old to an 8-year-old—of love for her, and she turns him down despite "how she loves him." Likewise, Enzo makes a gift of a garland of apples to Lila, who refuses them in words but keeps them. Enzo will love Lila for the course of the novel, and this isn't the last encounter between Elena and Nino.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it surprising that Enzo competes against Lila at school?



## Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Lila answer the math questions, even though she knows the answers?

## Discussion Question 3

Why did Lila shove Elena's doll through the grate?

## Vocabulary

virtuosity, scholastic, precociously, intuited, supple, voluptuous, demotion, subordination, shrewdly, prowess, reconnaissance, bitter, delinquent, pallor, malaise, tactile, anguish, greived



# Childhood: 13-18

## Summary

In Chapter 13, although Enzo, who was clearly intelligent, was not invited to apply for middle school, Lila and Elena were. The teacher speaks to Elena's mother, who doesn't want to pay for the extra tutoring Elena may need to pass the middle school entrance exam. The teacher also summons Lila's mother, who refuses to give Lila permission despite the teacher's efforts. Lila tells Elena she will take the test anyway, and based upon Lila's record thus far of doing whatever she wished and getting away with it, Elena believes her.

In Chapter 14, the author again returns to the scene at Don Achille's. The girls, though forbidden to go near his apartment, are led by Lila's determination to return there to retrieve their dolls. They appear at his door and meet him face to face; the fabled 'ogre' of the neighborhood is simply a regular man. Lila, with characteristic boldness, asks him for their dolls. He says he doesn't have them, and Lila persists that she saw him put the dolls in his bag, down in the cellar. He hands the girls a stack of bills and tells them to buy new dolls, and to remember they came from him.

In Chapter 15, Elena begins tutoring so she can take the school exam, but Lila doesn't go because her parents refuse to pay for the teacher. Still, Lila persists in saying she will take the test. Meanwhile, she takes the money from Don Achille and buys a copy of 'Little Women,' which the girls read over and over again. Rino asks Lila's parents consistently to send her to school, a question that often ends in violence. Thus, the girls become obsessed with money, and how to gain wealth. The best way they can conceive to make money is to write a book that will become as successful as 'Little Women' is. They set out to do this, but Elena lacks time, so Lila writes a book called 'The Blue Fairy' and binds it in her father's shop. Lila asks Elena to give the book to their teacher, who refuses to read it and treats Lila harshly.

In Chapter 16, Lila convinces Elena to skip school for the day. The girls make a plan to meet by the courtyard and slip out of 'the neighborhood' to see if they can walk to the sea. It is a grand and freeing adventure until the girls find they are hot, thirsty, and hungry, and what's more, a rainstorm catches them between their home and their destination. Lila is freezing and insists they return home, while Elena worries that Lila's aim the entire time was for them to get caught.

During Chapter 17, the girls finish elementary school. Elena passes the tests with higher marks than Lila's, and while Lila doesn't say anything about it, she takes on a new friend, a third wheel: Carmela. Carmela's presence causes envy and difficulty for Elena. Furthermore, Lila is visibly frustrated that she can't go to middle school, and Elena begins to rub it in. Lila's anger at the situation focuses not on Elena, but her family. One day Elena is walking to Lila's apartment and hears fighting and screaming coming from inside. This in itself isn't unusual - Elena herself is accustomed to her family fighting



about money. But at the climax of this fight, the neighborhood witnesses Lila flying out of her upper story window and hitting the ground, her arm broken.

Chapter 18 contains the ensuing discussion on neighborhood violence. The Bar Solara housed drunken riots and gambling. The emotion in Lila's house calmed down after her broken arm, but in the neighborhood the level increased until Don Achille is murdered in his own home, stabbed. Nobody saw the murderer and it causes a large amount of strife and speculation in the neighborhood. One day Elena and Lila are playing checkers at Carmela's house, when her father is arrested for Don Achille's murder.

## Analysis

These six chapters round out the story of childhood with the close of elementary school and the murder of Don Achille, two events which characterize the adolescent years for both girls. The former, because Elena is able to continue into middle school, and Lila is not—this truth will define the next years of their lives. Without school to occupy her brain, Lila will feel idle and will need to fill her time with another pursuit. The reader can see this agitation in Lila in these chapters, as she confidently tells Elena that she will find a way to attend school. Further, she punishes Elena's success by bringing a third friend into their circle—Carmela Peluso—and forces Elena's envy. In these chapters begin the oddly symbiotic part of their friendship, where their competition and envy drives them closer. Each of them is moved to action by what the other is doing. This will be the tone of their friendship for the future.

Don Achille makes two appearances in this section. First, he appears to be not the mysterious ogre of the neighborhood, but an almost kindly old man who gives the girls money when they come asking for their doll. The author begins the novel describing Lila's extreme bravery to even attempt to approach Don Achille, and in an odd way, this frightening errand binds together these two girls that would normally not necessarily be friends. Don, instead of returning their dolls or scolding them for their boldness, actually gives the girls some money and sends them away. The money is used on a book, which in turn spurs the girls' obsession with authoring a book in order to gain wealth. The idea of pursuing wealth and a higher social class is a major theme of the novel, and it begins here, when Lila finds herself unable to afford the middle school tuition.

The reader sees the end of Don Achille in Chapter 18, when he is murdered in his home. The author never really discloses what Don Achille has done to earn the neighborhood's fear or their hatred, and yet he is murdered. The effect on the neighborhood is momentous. Not only is there a mad search for the murderer, but his death leaves a vacuum, room for a new 'ogre' to step in and assume the title of most powerful being in the neighborhood.

## Discussion Question 1

What are Lila's possible hidden purpose behind skipping school for the day?



## Discussion Question 2

How does reading *Little Women* affect the girls' views of the world?

## Discussion Question 3

What causes the fight in which Lila is hurled from the window?

## Vocabulary

summoned, hesitant, timid, pilfering, consoled, bewildered, pylons, impoverish, obscurely, plebian, impudence, scolded, volleys, perimeter, tufa, indistinct, clamor, dazzling, suffocate, tumult



# Adolescence: 1-6

## Summary

In Chapter 1, Lila describes a strange phenomena she calls 'dissolving margins.' The setting for this episode is set several years forward in the narrative, when the girls are fifteen years old. They are enjoying New Year's Eve on the terrace of Stefano Carracci. She describes it to Elena as witnessing the outlines of people blurring and dissolving. Physical symptoms accompanied this feeling: cold sweats and a rapid heartbeat, nausea, her ears ringing. What was left, to Lila's eyes, after the outlines of her friends and family dissolved, was the raw materials of the world, terrifying in its base nature.

In Chapter 2, the action returns to the term after elementary school, after Lila's broken arm. As a compromise for not being able to afford middle school, the Cerullo family consents to send Lila to a class in home-making: stenography, bookkeeping, etc. This Lila accepts with disdain and acts out as often as she can. Elena, after boasting all summer about starting middle school, barely passes her Latin class, causing problems with her mother.

The narrative speeds along this first year of middle school, and it is summer again. Elena begins her first menstruation and doesn't know what it is; Carmela Peluso has to explain it to her. Elena and Carmela spend the day discussing it and find that Lila has not started hers yet. Lila finishes the conversation by telling Elena that she failed school on purpose so she can do what she wants. For the rest of the summer, Lila disappears from the playdates, and Elena becomes good friends with Carmela.

During Chapter 3, Elena describes the classic unhappiness of adolescence. She gains weight, develops breasts, and gets acne on her forehead. School is difficult despite her hard work, and she wonders what she is doing it. One day Gino, the pharmacist's son, tells Elena that the boys bet him ten lire that Elena's breasts were fake and padded with cotton. She lifts her shirt and proves them wrong, and Gino shares his spoils with her. During this episode, she had tried to act bold like Lila, and realizes that even in Lila's absence, she attempted to act the way she would have in that situation.

In Chapter 4, the reader finds Lila hard at work either at home with her mother, or helping her father and brother in the shoe shop. Lila becomes obsessed with the shoemaking, describing to Elena the process of the work and how it can be done beautifully. Elena feels the weight of the difference between Lila's excitement for the shoe shop and her own lack of interest and impact in school. She finds herself pulling on Lila's own passion for shoes to fill the gap.

Chapter 5 continues with this theme, in which Elena only wants to be passionate about whatever Lila is doing. Her friend is seldom around, and Elena feels the lack of her friend's passion. Elena herself is dissatisfied with school and her appearance. Her mother buys her a bra and criticizes her large, 'indecent' breasts. The boys at school



ask her to show them around, and she grows embarrassed, never wanting to leave her house. One day in the spring Gino asks if she will be his girlfriend. She refuses, and the cycle is repeated several times. Lila gives her some advice on the matter, which makes Elena feel special again, and raises Lila's status to the most knowledgeable girl in the neighborhood.

In Chapter 6, Elena is mortified to learn that she barely passed the school year, particularly Latin. Her parents tell her she must pass the Latin exam again if she wants to continue in school, but they can't pay for lessons. She decides to try to study on her own. Lila calls her out and they spend some time talking, discovering that all of Carmela's thoughts are pale reflections of suggestions that Lila planted there—her crush on Alfonso, her love for shoes, etc. The girls cement their friendship, feeling as if they are unified against the neighborhood. At the end of the conversation, Lila offers to study Latin with Elena.

## Analysis

The author speeds along early adolescence in these chapters, setting up for a more detailed narrative when the girls grow older. The competitive nature between the two girls is extended in this section, with Elena starting to menstruate and develop into a woman, leaving Lila behind. Although this development has nothing to do with anything except genetics, it sets up another level of competition between the girls. Lila responds by throwing herself into her shoe making. Here the reader sees the magnetism of Lila's personality: although Elena has, on paper, a far better life, with a host of things that Lila would love to have: expensive schooling, an hourglass figure, attention from boys, Lila talks up her own mundane existence with such intelligence and passion that the other girls feel they are missing out. Elena finds herself depressed that she, too, is not working in a shoe shop. This element of Lila's personality is so interesting to the reader, and is continued at the end of the section, where the girls find that Carmela Peluso has internalized everything Lila has casually suggested to her—a romantic fixation on Alfonso Carracci and a love for shoemaking, to name two. For Elena, who is as equally prone to this as Carmela is, she feels bonded to Lila again, that they two hold the secret to how to neighborhood ticks.

There are some classic signs of adolescence displayed in these chapters. Elena's lethargy, dissatisfaction with school, lack of obedience to her parents, and disgust with her own body are all normal for a child her age. These same symptoms are evident in Lila as well, although they are played out differently. Because of Lila's confidence, she makes as if she is always happy with her lot in life, even if she isn't. She refuses to submit to the educational goals her parents set for her, is unhappy that she's not developing as her friends are, and instead tries to make magic happen in the shoe shop. The obsession over the shoemaking is foreshadowing for future chapters, when the ability to design and make shoes becomes a vital focus of Lila's efforts.





## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Lila feel about school?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Lila manage to get what she wants out of her life?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What are some indications that Elena is floundering in her identity in these chapters?

## **Vocabulary**

intolerable, repulsion, stenography, anxiety, boasting, mediocrity, harmonious, surly, lethargic, surrogate, gesticulated, misappropriation, fatuous, banal, gait



# Adolescence: 7-12

## Summary

In Chapter 7, the author continues to move quickly through the early adolescent years. In this chapter, the Solara brothers are introduced, Marcello and Michele, whose father owns the Bar Solara, a well-stocked pastry shop and sort-of bar. The brothers are key to the rest of the story. They own the first car of the neighborhood—a blue Fiat 1100—and parade it through the streets on Sundays.

The Peluso's old carpenter shop was transformed into a grocery, run by Stefano, Don Achille's oldest son. It is a well-stocked store that has formed a new hub in the neighborhood. The grocery cart is now driven around the streets by Enzo, now grown past his rock-throwing stage. Overall, the neighborhood, like its young people, is trying to grow. Elena and Lila continue to study Latin together, but of course Lila already knows a host of Latin, because she has four library cards (one for each member of her family) and has been checking out multiple books at a time. With Lila's help, Elena passes the exam easily in the fall. After helping Elena succeed, however, Lila has no more use for Latin.

Chapter 8 continues with the new school year. Elena excels in school this year. She is also dealing with adolescent weight gain. Walking home one day the Solara brothers approached in their Fiat and asked to drive her home. She refuses, and acknowledges to herself that if she had consented, it would have been a mark against her purity, and the male members of her family would have been compelled to defend her honor. Not long after, there are rumors of Melina's daughter, Ada, going with the brothers for an hour or more; afterwards her brother Antonio goes after the Solara brothers and earns himself a beating. This event causes lots of discussion in the neighborhood. The younger girls secretly admire the handsome and dangerous brothers.

Lila tries to convince her father and her brother to design and make a new kind of shoe to sell, but meets resistance. Lila is obsessed with making the shoes so she can gain status and change her situation.

In Chapter 9, Elena has finished middle school with the highest marks in the class, but it is an empty victory. Outside of school, only looks and boyfriends were worth having, and further, Lila tells her in so many words that, had she been in school, her marks would have been higher. A sad emptiness settles on Elena. She doesn't know what she'll do next, and Lila is so busy with her shoe obsession she doesn't have time for her. Elena is invited to a ceremony at the library, for being in the top five patrons that year: the top four were the four cards Lila checked out in her family's names. Elena is leaving the library with her friends when the teacher approaches and says she will talk to Elena's parents about her possibly going to high school. At the time, she is walking with Pasquale Peluso, Carmela's older brother, and a construction worker. Elena finds him very nice and attractive and slightly dangerous because he is a Communist.



In Chapter 10, the teacher appears at Elena's house to talk to them about high school. The conversation is interrupted by Melina, who has gone crazy because somebody has shown her the published book of poems by Donato Sarratore, poems supposedly written for her.

Chapter 11 sees Elena developing a friendship with Pasquale Peluso and motivated by dreams of publishing her own book, as Sarratore had done. Pasquale seems to ask her many questions about Lila. They walk to the shoemaker's shop to deliver the library books she won, and Pasquale obviously admires Lila. The girls discuss the Sarratore poems, that it's both romantic and torturous for Donato to inscribe his poetry to Melina, who pines after him. Elena is excited to be having a private conversation with Lila and admires their friendship until she realizes that Pasquale had used her to get a chance to see Lila.

This theme continues in Chapter 12, when Elena watches the way Pasquale watches Lila, and is irritated beyond control. She covers this emotion by returning to the topic of local gossip. Eventually Rino interrupts, commanding Lila to get back to work. Elena is afraid to leave Lila's side, afraid that if Lila got a boyfriend, she wouldn't need Elena anymore to cover this feeling of need and inadequacy, Elena tells Lila about going to high school, that she will study Latin and Greek. Lila responds with the bomb that she, too, has started menstruating, and Elena is left scrabbling for another way to top her friend.

## Analysis

These chapters get into the raw emotions that surround this unusual friendship that is the heart of the novel. On the one hand, it is almost uncomfortable to be so involved with Elena's feelings of competition and inadequacy, to see so plainly how her value is inextricably wrapped up in Lila. On the other hand, such emotions in friendships are commonplace, and the reader must remember that this story takes place in the 1950s, in a small microcosm of a small city. The characters of this novel inhabit a very small world, and so it naturally follows that they are all wrapped up in each other.

This section opens with an introduction of who will become Lila's main suitors in her teen years: Marcello Solara, who drives a Fiat, whose father owns the pastry shop; Stefano Carracci, son of Don Achille and owner of the expanded grocery; Pasquale Peluso, a construction worker and a communist; and to a lesser extent, Enzo, who drives the vegetable cart around the neighborhood. Marcello and Stefano are the economic giants of the neighborhood and are in obvious competition for power, with Lila as the prize. Pasquale and Enzo, by contrast, will be seen to have a real affection for her, an appreciation for her heart and quick mind.

The Solara brothers are handsome, wealthy, and dangerous. They snatch girls from the street into their car and compromise their reputation. Lila becomes obsessed with the idea of making shoes in order to combat their wealth and power. Wealth, she tells Elena, is a vehicle to change: change of finances, change of location, change of



situation. It is Lila's obsession and a consistent theme in the novel. Lila wishes to be elevated by any means possible. She is gifted with beauty and intelligence but is bound by her socio-economic status, so she must use her gifts to fuel her elevation. When school is exhausted as a possibility, she turns to the shoe, which will likewise become an obsession for her, and a symbol of her way out.

Another interesting footnote to this section is the author reminding the reader about Donato Sarratore, the railworker turned poet, who broke Melina's heart and left her, yet wrote a book of poems and dedicated it to her. Was this an honorable thing to do? Was it a symbol of love or a haphazard gift? Elena is starry-eyed at the thought of such a love, and this foreshadows a time when the Sarratore family will enter her life once again.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the significance of Lila starting to menstruate?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is it ironic that the Cerullo family won the prize for the most library books read?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Describe Elena's complicated feelings towards Lila.

## **Vocabulary**

clientele, pneumonia, stocky, disheveled, conveyed, adroitly, annihilation, vulgar, preamble, wavered, captivated, brutality, precisely



# Adolescence: 13-18

## Summary

In Chapter 13, the fact that Lila has started menstruating blows Elena away, it takes away something Elena felt she had over Lila. She is determined to improve her appearance and begins dressing with intention. Secretly, she is glad that Lila is forced to wear shabby clothes and she is not. They go for a walk and talk about high school. Elena exaggerates it to make it sound better, hoping that Lila will feel the pain of separation as she often does. As they are walking, the Solara brothers pull up in their car and ask the girls to climb in for a drive. Although she knows she should ignore them, she turns and refuses in a haughty way. Marcello grabs her hand, breaking her mother's silver bracelet. Lila pulls out a knife and holds it to Marcello's throat, threatening him. The brothers back away, but not before fixing Elena's bracelet.

In Chapter 14, Elena's father takes her on the bus to his hotel in Naples. She sees many amazing things, including the sea and Mount Vesuvius, and she is enthralled, feeling like she visited a distant and exotic land. After returning to the neighborhood she runs straight to the shoe shop and begins describing it to Lila in detail; but Lila isn't really listening. Instead, at the close of Elena's story, Lila says they should go dancing with Pasquale. She had decided she liked dancing, and shows Elena the steps in the shoe shop, saying that she wished she had a gramophone, and then pointing out that gramophone is a Greek word.

Chapter 15 sees Elena fuming that Lila has already started studying Greek, for no reason. She considers dropping Lila, because she always feels a step behind her, but she finds it easier to stay with Lila so she can see what she's up to. But the feeling of inadequacy stays. She sees that Lila has started to grow and develop, and she is beautiful.

In Chapter 16, Rino and Lila are growing impatient in their stagnant lives, ever waiting for a chance to distinguish themselves. They plan an outing outside of the neighborhood for a large group including Pasquale, who had increased his attentions to Lila. At the pizzeria, the pizza maker, an older married man, makes eyes at Lila and even blows her a kiss. Pasquale slaps the pizza maker and causes a scene. The scene is repeated later that summer, when a family man in a cafe proclaimed Lila's beauty in front of everyone. The male attention unsettles Rino and makes Pasquale jealous. Even later that summer at a dance for one of the girls, several of the neighborhood boys compete for Lila's attention. Lila is dancing so happily she barely notices that her partner is at one time Marcello Solara. It nearly causes a fight.

In Chapter 17, Lila begins to ask Pasquale about Communism, and learning something new seems to instill her with purpose. Elena worries that Lila and Pasquale will fall in love and leave her behind.



High school begins in Chapter 18, and it is far more difficult than middle school. Elena feels self-conscious and turns her nervousness into studying during all of her spare time. Sometimes she sees Lila in the morning before school, and sometimes sees Pasquale with her, which makes her want a boyfriend as quickly as possible. She feels like she is behind in time. One day she sees Nino Saratorre at the high school, and she is disturbed and thrilled. She begins to see success at school, thanks to studying Greek with Lila. The teacher suggests a higher course for her. She and Lila have a conversation in which Elena lists all of the boys that are in love with her; Lila seems surprised by this, and certainly not moved by it. Lila isn't interested in any of their attentions.

## Analysis

These chapters continue the adolescence of the two girls, and expands on the theme of Elena's anxiety, particularly where comparing herself with Lila is concerned. It starts with the fact that Lila has gotten her period; Elena considers all of the ways that Lila will grow pretty and develop. Elena, who has always had this one thing over her friend, decides she must care for her appearance so she is also pretty. Their friendship grows and feeds on this competition that neither of them can control. It isn't really healthy, but it's also fairly common for adolescent girls to feel this way.

Lila is not innocent of the feeling, either; the author demonstrates this with her studying languages she knows that Elena will learn in school. At best, she wants to spend time with Lila doing something they can share in common; at worst, she wants to learn better and faster than her friend, and without the benefit of class. In any case, Lila's mastery of Greek puts Elena into despair again, and she feels powerless over her feelings. She wants to pull away from Lila, but finds it safer to stay close to her so she can see what she is up to.

Lila's development into the most beautiful young girl in the neighborhood, and the subsequent competition for her affection, makes up the bulk of the novel until she settles on one suitor. The attention from the older men foreshadows how her magnetism will spread among the young men of their acquaintance as well. Already Pasquale is attentive towards her, and at the dance, Enzo and Solara begin to watch her as well.

The scene with the Solaras at the car is another bit of foreshadowing. Lila's fierceness in protection of Elena and Marcello's interest in both girls will develop into an important piece of the plot as the girls grow older. Elena even mentions that she is excited and repulsed by the Solara brothers, a sentiment that is echoed and deepens as the story continues.

At the close of this section, Elena sees Nino Saratorre at school, and her love for him is reignited.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Lila show such an interest in Facism?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does the male attention towards Lila infuriate Rino so much?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe the complicated feelings surrounding Elena's learning that Lila has started to study Greek.

## Vocabulary

aura, expanse, intimately, sociability, congeniality, benevolent, exuberance, quadrille, inadequacy, intensified, conclusively, fancifully, shapely, malicious, emanated, braggart, obscenities, agile



# Adolescence: 19-24

## Summary

Chapter 19 begins with Elena feeling slightly superior over Lila, mostly due to her education, and Lila's being forced to stay in the neighborhood with a lower social status. Lila and Rino show Elena a pair of unusual, innovative men's shoes that they designed and built by hand. Rino is very proud of their accomplishment, while Lila is still skeptical. They ask Elena to weigh in on the shoes. Rino is angry at Lila's skepticism.

Chapter 20 recounts the New Year's Eve party that Elena foreshadows back in Chapter 1 of the section on adolescence. The boys of the neighborhood stage a fireworks competition; Marcello Solara has been trying to catch Lila's eye, and Rino wants to show them up. However, the girls aren't sure Rino has enough money to put on a good show. When the girls accidentally bump into Stefano Caracci, he invites them to his house and promises the best fireworks in town.

In Chapter 21, the girls accept Stefano's invitation and argue about which of them he may be interested in. If he wasn't interested in one of them, what could Stefano's motives be? They decide that he's trying to make a good show in the neighborhood and take his father's place, but as a kind, inclusive man, not a scary one. The friends decide they would prefer to throw in their lot with Stefano rather than the Solara family and together head to his 5th floor apartment together.

Chapter 22 recounts the events of the party itself. Most of the neighborhood characters are there, minus the Solaras. Elena wishes to attract the attention of one of the boys, to feel pretty by someone's standards. At midnight they have a firework show, and it's magnificent. Eventually, the Solaras respond with a light show of their own, and it becomes a competition, with fireworks volleying back and forth across the neighborhood. The young men grow intense in their competition, and Lila experiences the 'dissolving margins' episode that Elena references earlier. Lila feels like the borders that comprise her bother Rino break down, and she sees all that he is truly made of. When Lila returns to herself, she realizes that the Solaras' are shooting at them.

In Chapter 23, Elena discovers that the events of New Year's Eve have made Lila withdrawn. She ceases all useful activity. The pressure and fervor to become wealthy and leave the neighborhood cease. Rino is angry at her laziness, and a feud ensues between the siblings. It climaxes on a feast day, when Rino shows his father the shoes they made. Their father is furious that his children went behind his back. For a while, the anger dies down. Lila stays at home with her mother, and Rino works in the shop with his father, but he's sulky and depressed.

Chapter 24 finds the winter holiday ended and Elena back at school. Elena's short-lived relationship with Gino is over, and Lila confesses that she's had declarations of love from two young men: Pasquale and Marcello Solara. She refuses them both; kindly to





Pasquale and rudely to Marcello. She throws all of the horrid things he's done in his face, and he tries to defend himself. Elena warns Lila not to say such ugly things to Marcello.

## Analysis

The action in the novel increases in these chapters, and only a few weeks worth of events are covered. The New Years Eve party is a key event because it begins the feeling of competition between Stefano Caracci and the Solara brothers. While at this point in the story, the loyalty of the neighborhood is the main thing at stake, there is foreshadowing that Lila will become the next prize. When the girls discuss Stefano's motives for being so kind, it is clear that he will choose a young girl as his partner in being the center of the neighborhood, and the reader already knows how impressed with Lila the rest of the young men are. The New Year's party also shows how most of the characters are, if not supportive of Stefano, very much against the Solaras. Truly, the Solaras brothers have no allies in the main players in the narrative. And yet, they all fear the Solaras. The chapter ends with Elena gravely warning Lila not to be mean to Marcello and not to tell anybody that she treated him so rudely. The fact that Michele unleashed a host of real bullets across the neighborhood on New Year's Eve shows that the brothers are dangerous people. All of these hints will point to impending danger involving the Solaras.

The other main event in this section concerns the shoes. For Lila and Rino, the shoes have been a hope of leaving the neighborhood, of acquiring wealth and prestige and doing something grand. It is an emotional blow to have their father treat the shoes with such disdain. He judges them, he dislikes them, and the effect on Rino is devastating. This event happens but one week after New Year's, and the cumulative effect of both events on Rino and Lila is noticeable. They both become listless, sulky, and withdrawn. The reader may notice how alike Lila and Rino are, except that Lila is gifted with unusual intelligence that gives her a clever edge, a way to use finesse in her endeavors. Rino is all passion and emotion.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Fernando dislike the shoes so strongly?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did the Solaras shoot at the Caracci's terrace?

## Discussion Question 3

Is Lila actually sad that Elena's life has moved on without her?

## Vocabulary

acquitted, expletives, impetuous, emulate, frenzy, impoverished, unequivocally, hypothesis, cordiality, penurious, frenetic, spectacle, disfiguring, insensate, consequences, sullen, tormented, imminent, controversy



# Adolescence: 25-30

## Summary

In Chapter 25, Lila shows herself completely uninterested in anything Elena does. She stops reading, and because of their strange symbiosis, Elena finds that school no longer gives her pleasure either. Elena finds herself excelling in school, but she doesn't enjoy it anymore, because Lila no longer cares for school either. She meets a professor from the higher levels, who takes a great interest in her. She continues to see Nino sometimes. When she tries to connect with Lila, the only topic of discussion is how Marcello is still pursuing her. Lila is convinced that if Rino finds out about Marcello, they will fight; she is convinced that she is a curse on mankind.

In Chapter 26, Rino and Pasquale take Lila, Elena, and Carmela out for an evening. Lila insists they visit the part of Naples where fashionable people will be walking. They come upon the Solaras with two of the other neighborhood girls. Elena feels bitter about the four young people looking beautiful in a flashy car. The entry into the fancier part of town is a stark contrast. The girls make themselves feel better by putting down the other women. They sit in a cafe, and one of their remarks is overheard by its subject, and a volley of words ensues. Lila breaks up the fight, but a while later, the young people return with friends and corner Rino and Pasquale at the piazza. The Solaras' join them just in time, weapons in hand, and together the boys fight the other kids away. Eventually the Solaras take the girls away from the fight. Elena is shocked at the violence and feels that they have brought it to Naples.

In Chapter 27, school has ended and Elena is promoted with a scholarship to continue. The teacher asks if Elena would like to visit her cousin in Ischia over the summer, and Elena feels that things are going so well for her, she can't even tell Lila. The violence in Naples causes a kind of truce with the Solaras, one Rino and Lila do not welcome. The truce brings business and prosperity to the shoe shop in small doses. Rino begins to enjoy Marcello's attention, but Lila is worried by it. Rino asks him to dinner and Lila is uncomfortable. Marcello asks leading questions about expanding the shoe shop and asks to see the shoes Rino and Lila made. Lila is reluctant and hides until Marcello leaves, which causes more family drama.

Chapter 28 sees Rino basically harassing Lila about Marcello and the shoes. He says he thinks Marcello would like to go into business with the Cerullos and help them market the shoes. They speak to their father; he says he'll put the shoes in the window to see if someone is interested in them. They try to sell them to Marcello, but he says they're too tight, and instead tells Lila's father that he wishes to marry her.

In Chapter 29, Rino goes into a massive sulk, showing symptoms of a fever. Lila tells her family that she doesn't wish to marry Marcello. Before Elena can stay near to help, she is sent to the island of Ischia to stay with her teacher's cousin. Before Elena knows



what's happening, she's on the ferry to Ischia, away from Lila and her family for six weeks.

In Chapter 30, Elena blossoms. The cousin, Nella, owns a home on the shore, and employs Elena to help in the kitchen in exchange for board. Elena swims and reads, grows tan and slim, the acne on her face dries up, and she's incredibly happy. She waits to hear from Lila but doesn't immediately. Although she enjoys her time, she worries about her life moving away from Lila's and that, being separated from Lila's life, her own is minimized. At the end of July, Nella tells Elena that the Saratorre family will be coming to stay in the house at the end of the week.

## Analysis

The first major plot twist happens in these chapters, as Marcello Solara finally declares himself to Lila and begins to pursue her for good. His courtship will take up a large bit of plot and will cause more drama with Lila's family. Marcello is wealthy and influential, and her father and brother wish her to accept him. They tie their well-being to her relationship with him; they tie the newly made shoes to her relationship with him. The reader can see the strain on Lila. For a girl normally so self-assured and clever, the drama with Marcello takes the shine from her, and she loses focus on what she normally loves. The Lila of before is always scheming; this Lila is only trying to survive.

What's happening with Marcello takes up all of Lila's focus, and she can no longer pay attention to Elena's life, which is going really well. And true to their intricate friendship, Elena feels that her life isn't significant because it no longer matters to Lila either. From the prologue, the reader can see that Elena does eventually marry, have children, and leave Naples for another city, but in adolescence Elena has trouble enjoying life outside of Lila.

Elena's time on the island of Ischia is a turning point in the novel for many reasons. First, Elena blossoms and finds enjoyment away from her origins. While she feels the pull of Lila's drama, there is so much to occupy her on Ischia she thrives. The end of Chapter 30 promises more drama with the arrival of the Saratorre family; Nella, the owner of the house, even has a book inscribed to her from Donato himself, who appears to be very free with who he inscribes his books to. The reader leaves the chapter knowing that Nino, Elena's longtime crush, will appear. Second, back in the neighborhood, the drama between Lila and Marcello will reach a boiling point, and what Lila does will determine the course of the rest of her life.

## Discussion Question 1

How are the shoes Lila made tied to her feelings about Marcello's interest in her?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does the teacher think Elena should go to Ischia?

## Discussion Question 3

What worries Elena about the violence in Naples?

## Vocabulary

spitefully, diligence, imprint, dismantle, goad, constancy, perceptible, impelled, energetically, conferred, perturbed, fragility, ravaged, monotonous, inoculated



# Adolescence: 31-36

## Summary

In Chapter 31, Elena writes a long letter to Lila detailing her excitement and anxiety about seeing Nino again. The family arrives, but Nino isn't among them. Nino's sister Marisa tells Elena that she knows all about her from what Nino has said, and also that he would come to Ischia in a few weeks. Marisa thinks Nino is cold and unfeeling, and cannot stand their father. Elena has dinner with the Saratorres' that evening, and gets along well with Donato and his wife Lidia. She enjoys a few days with them, and then Donato leaves.

In Chapter 32, Nino arrives and shows little interest to anybody in the house. Elena waits to connect with him but he ignores her. After a few days this changes; they talk about books and school. Every few days Donato comes back for a day, then leaves again. When he is there, he goes to Nino and it agitates the young man. One night Nino tells Elena that he'd always envied her friendship with Lila, because they were so close. He reminds her of when he asked her to marry him, when they were very young. The time grows close for Nino to leave and Elena grows sad and lonely. He tells her that he will never be like his father, that he selfishly made Melina his lover when he shouldn't have. Elena says they were just overcome with passion. Nino gets angry, then turns back and kisses Elena. He tells her he's leaving the next day.

In Chapter 33, Elena is upset that Nino is leaving. He leaves without saying goodbye. Donato is there, and is so jovial that she is comforted. She also realizes that Lila never answered her letters. She is happy with the Saratorres', but misses Lila and Nino.

Chapter 34 opens on Elena's 15th birthday. On that day she receives a letter from Lila, and is struck by how perfect her writing is. She is drawn into Lila's narrative like a story. With her father's consent, Marcello was coming every night for dinner and to court Lila. He lavishes gifts upon the Cerullos. Lila says she's terrified; she doesn't wish to marry Marcello, but her family is insistent.

In Chapter 35, Elena tries to respond to Lila's letter but has a hard time forming words that communicate her feelings. She decides to go home early. That evening, Donato comes to her bedside and sexually assaults her. She is shocked by the wrongness of it, as well as her body's response to it, and it confuses and terrifies her. He tells her that he will take her to the beach the next night, and leaves. At dawn Elena leaves the house to go home.

In Chapter 36, Elena returns to Naples in the awful thick of summer. She feels different there: tan, while the residents of the neighborhood were pale and hot. Lila is thrilled to see her, although Elena can see the change in her. The trial with Marcello has aged her. The family strife is at its height, with Lila's parents wanting her to marry Marcello and Rino defending her right to choose her own husband. They walk the neighborhood



together and see that Stefano Caracci has bought himself a red convertible sports car, far nicer than that of the Solaras'. He comes out of the grocery to talk to the girls. Stefano has told Lila that he bought it for her. He takes the girls for a drive. It is dangerous because he is going against Marcello's wishes. Elena hears them converse. Lila asks Stefano how he is different than Marcello. Stefano mentions the beautiful shoes Rino made, and Lila challenges him to buy them.

## Analysis

These chapters are mainly concerned with the Saratorre family's visit to Ischia. There is a strange relationship with Donato and his children. They seem to tolerate his overblown kindness, but see through it. Nino tells Elena that his father is a fake and a cheater and a liar. He is disgusted with his father, who took Melina as a lover and left her destitute, when he should be faithful to his wife. To Elena, Donato is kind and jovial and a pleasure to be around. He treats her with kindness: disinterested at first, but after Nino leaves he approaches Lila and sexually assaults her. This event serves to bear truth to what Donato's children have been insinuating the entire time, and also to remind the reader that 'real life,' with its violence and ugliness, pervades all places—not just the neighborhood, as Elena would like to believe.

Lila's one letter from this period arrives, on Elena's birthday, and it follows that, compared to the drama of Lila's problems with Marcello, Elena feels her time on the island is boring. Lila's writing style is so fluid and interesting, Elena can't muster the energy to write a letter back in response. It's ironic here that Elena feels such a lack in her own adventure, and the next thing that occurs is Nino's kiss and the subsequent visit from Donato. These are both highly unusual events, ones that Elena will never share.

The next plot twist arrives when Elena returns from Ischia to find Lila, tense and worried about Marcello. At the close of Chapter 36, the reader sees hints of a blossoming relationship between Lila and Stefano Caracci. This is dangerous, because the Caracci family competes with the Solaras family as the head of the neighborhood. The reader has already seen the violence in the Solaras', and now they are competing for Lila's affection. Lila challenges Stefano to buy Rino's shoes, and the reader sees a flash of intelligence replace the worry in Lila's eyes—she has a plan. The loaded question for Lila and the reader, though, is when she asks Stefano, "Are you any different (from Marcello)?"

## Discussion Question 1

What negative family dynamics are evident in the Saratorre family?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some ways that Elena and Nino are well suited?



## Discussion Question 3

What effect does Lila's letter have on Elena?

## Vocabulary

apprehension, foreshadowing, excessive, hostility, congenial, paternal, convoluted, ostentatious, endeavored, tumult, apprehensively, hypocrite, lashing





# Adolescence: 37-42

## Summary

In Chapter 37, Stefano takes the girls to the shoe shop. Hiding his feelings for Lila, Stefano speaks politely with Rino and Fernando and requests after the shoes. Rino is delighted when Stefano offers to buy them. He also takes Lila's drawings for further shoes, and they all leave the shop. Lila warns him not to try to insult or trick her family. She tells Stefano that Marcello has already tried to buy her, and she won't let it happen. Stefano responds that he never spends money unless it will make money.

In Chapter 38, Elena decides to close her mind to the summer with the Saratorres and devote herself to Lila's drama. Lila takes Elena to Stefano's grocery often. They boil down Lila's goals to this: getting rid of Marcello. They decide to encourage Stefano's attentions if it will get them to that point. Stefano goes back to the shop and pays an exorbitant price for the shoes, which are too tight, and also pays for Lila's drawings so he can frame them. Furthermore, he proposes investing in the shop and expanding it into a proper shoe shop. Stefano's proposal throws the family into fits, such that they ignore Marcello. Finally, the men settle on a plan, but Stefano insists they only produce shoes that Lila designed.

In Chapter 39, Marcello is at the Cerullo home, and Rino taunts him with Stefano: his new car, the fact that he bought the shoes, the business. This continues, and tension grows in the Cerullo home when Marcello is around. The girls weigh the two suitors, compare the way they spend their money. Marcello is aware that he is losing his suit and begins to overreact. The work on the new shoe shop begins, and Stefano finally tells Lila's dad that he wants to marry her. Fernando tells him he can't, that Lila is engaged to Marcello. Stefano calls Lila into the room and asks if she loves him more than Marcello, if she'll marry him. Lila says she'll marry Stefano. Her father is scared of offending the Solaras, but Lila says she'll tell Marcello.

In Chapter 40, when Marcello shows up for dinner. Lila asks him to take her out for a walk and while they're gone, she tells him she doesn't love him, she loves Stefano.

In Chapter 41, things have moved along quickly and Lila seems happy. The shoe factory is moving along, she'd rid herself of Marcello, and become engaged to the most popular young man in the neighborhood. Elena feels the sting of Lila's success when school starts again. Elena becomes friendly with Stefano's younger brother Alfonso. Elena sees Nino at school but feels embarrassed and doesn't know how to deal with him, so she brushes him off, although she would truly like to have Nino as a boyfriend so she can keep up with Lila. One day she is walking with Alfonso and sees Donato Saratorre. Elena stays attached to Alfonso because he is safe.

In Chapter 42, Elena is feeling low, that Lila's life and hers are on a seesaw, with one being up naturally causing the other's to be low. She finds that she needs glasses,



which makes her parents angry. Elena wants to depend on Lila so they can stay friends. One day her glasses get trampled at school; she fears her mother's reprisal and flees to Lila for advice. Lila takes the glasses and has Stefano fix them for her. Elena wonders how she can every pay Lila back, to which Lila responds there's no need—she has all the money she needs.

## Analysis

The narrative, which has been steadily gaining tension throughout Marcello Solara's attempt to court Lila, finally finds its peak in these chapters. Stefano Caracci finds success where Marcello did not. This is mainly because Stefano always framed his intentions towards Lila in her own choice in the matter; further, he takes care of her family first, by investing in the shoe shop. Marcello spoiled her family in the short term with treats, but the shoe factory will take care of them long term and give them some ownership in their projects. It is interesting to watch the slow and sneaky way Stefano makes his way into Lila's good graces, and how Elena encourages him, mainly because she is afraid not to. Lila's life moves in such exciting circles that Elena feels she has to stay attached to it at all costs, and for her that means helping her break free of Marcello so she can engage herself to Stefano.

After their engagement is official, Elena becomes depressed. When she feels happy, Lila is low, and now that Lila is happy, Elena is low. This is a continuance of the strange bond between the two girls; they are both attached to and repelled by one another. Lila's success makes Elena feel more unsuccessful. While she felt pretty after her summer on Ischia, she feels ugly again. This, too, is the author's use of symbolism: Elena always relates her emotions to her looks.

School begins again, and Elena can't figure out how to deal with Nino. She loves him but she is angry with him and treats him poorly. She allows Alfonso Caracci to befriend her so that she has a male option. She sees Donato Saratorre and is horrified: his assault on her seems linked with Nino. The emotions she feels for father and son are wrapped together.

Lila's status as the most envied girl in the neighborhood is perhaps solidified by the last words in Chapter 42, where she has Stefano fix Elena's glasses like it's the easiest thing in the world. For a girl that has struggled with a lack of money for the entire story, Lila suddenly has anything she needs at her fingertips. Her natural beauty will be enhanced in future chapters by Stefano's money.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Elena rude to Nino Saratorre when she sees him again?



## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Marcello's and Stefano's attentions towards Lila and her family. How did Stefano succeed?

## Discussion Question 3

Why did Lila wait so long to turn Marcello down?

## Vocabulary

confidante, embroidered, improving, incredulous, tactful, petulant, inaugurate, audacious, deteriorated, opaque



# Adolescence: 43-48

## Summary

As Lila explores her new position as a wealthy fiancée in Chapter 43, Elena realizes that the seesaw of their friendship links them. Lila has a fiancée, but Elena has an enviable education. Elena admits her success in school but doesn't know what good it does for her. Alfonso, her loyal friend, isn't an intelligent conversationalist. Elena has no outlet for her intellect. Lila is still fiercely intelligent, but not intellectual, and Elena's attempts at deep conversation with her friend fall flat.

In the beginning of Chapter 44, the author shares how Lila, as the new queen of the neighborhood, causes envy and resentment. Stefano's own mother and sister don't like her. Elena tries to pull Stefano into their friend group, but it doesn't work as well. It is easier for Lila and Stefano to be a fashionable couple. Elena realizes that Lila doesn't fit in their old group anymore, and secretly wishes that it will crack a bit, so that Lila will need her again.

In Chapter 45, Elena resigns herself to her old friend group, particularly Antonio, Melina's son, who works as a mechanic. Because she is certain that nobody will approve of the match, she sees him in secret. Many of the neighborhood kids have paired up, and when they get together, conversation always turns to Lila. Pasquale especially is critical of Stefano and of their match. Elena always defends Lila, but arguments are common. One night Pasquale insinuates that Stefano's money is not legally gained. He intimates that Lila has "sold herself" into Stefano's black market riches, and Enzo explodes in anger.

In Chapter 46, the shoe shop is not moving quickly, because Rino and Fernando disagree on the plans. Progress is slow and Stefano wants to see a return on his investment quickly. Lila has settled, seems satisfied, almost sweet with her impending life as a wife and mother. The fierce ambition is absent in her. The neighborhood young people spread rumors that Lila has been sexually involved with both Marcello and Stefano. Elena reports this to Lila, who denies the rumors. Lila and Stefano vow to ignore the Solaras', not to avenge their honor. Elena marvels at this, that Lila and Stefano are effectively changing the tone of the neighborhood by refusing to fall prey to gossip, by being kind, by doing what they wish without playing by the rules of society.

In Chapter 47, the rumors of Lila's promiscuity reach Pasquale, who is obviously still in love with her. The next day, Marcello's car is demolished and he and his brother savagely beaten. They don't say who did it. Eventually they heal and buy a new car, and begin acting like bullies again, proving that Lila was right - ignoring such people was the best way to deal with them. Lila and Stefano set a date for their wedding.

Chapter 48 begins with Elena feeling upset that the wedding is actually happening. Elena feels the comparison between them even more strongly. However, at school she



receives praise for her writing and she realizes that the writing style was her own, not Lila's. This restores her confidence. She visits her old teacher, who expresses regret that Lila's intelligence is seemingly wasted. Elena finds a job taking some neighborhood children to the beach every day. Antonio finally asks if she will be his girlfriend; although she doesn't feel attracted to him very much, she agrees because of her need to have somebody.

## Analysis

The dramatic theme of Elena's and Lila's friendship continues. Elena puts words to it, that one of them has what the other lacks, and vice versa, but she feels the only thing she has over Lila is her education, and even that is useless to her. There is no outlet for her intellectual thoughts, and the author is setting up what will eventually drive Elena back to Nino. In the meantime, though, she surrounds herself with a friendship with Alfonso and a quiet flirtation with Antonio the mechanic. For Elena, these boys are safe—Alfonso is Stefano's brother, and so he is a constant link to Lila. Antonio, while only a mechanic, and the son of Melina, he is older like Stefano, so in her mind he is a good comparison to Lila's Stefano.

In these chapters the reader sees what a ripple Lila has caused. The girls are envious of how polished and beautiful Stefano's money has made Lila. The boys form a group of her rejected suitors—Pasquale, Enzo, and to a lesser extent Marcello—they all grieve for the loss of her. She is a favorite topic of conversation. For the first time, someone mentions that Stefano's wealth can't all be from the grocery, and makes a link to Don Achille's black market doings from long ago. The next attack comes in rumors that Lila has lent herself out to Marcello and Stefano sexually. It is interesting to note that weapons that the residents of the neighborhood use towards one another - gossip and rumors. This is what they use to attack Lila. Lila's response, by contrast, is revolutionary- ignore all of it. Be nice to everyone. Be the benevolent leaders of the neighborhood they are. Be higher than the base attacks and behavior of their friends. Elena even compares them to John and Jacqueline Kennedy, beautiful and wealthy and sharing their good favor with the lowly people near them.

Lila's response is compared to Pasquale's who, after hearing of the rumors Marcello is spreading, takes Enzo and Antonio and beats the Solaras' and destroys their car. They are humbled for a short time, but then restore themselves: a new car is bought and they act like the same bullies they were the day before. It's as if the author wants to communicate that the Solaras are going to be who they are. It's how one responds to them that's important.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some indications that Stefano isn't that different from Marcello?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Elena consent to be Antonio's girlfriend?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Elena's writing for her third-year exams is praised so highly?

## Vocabulary

figurine, impelled, marginality, pamper, tattered, moldy, atmosphere, vicarious, obscene, indigent, compact, flanked, reprisal, exposition



# Adolescence: 49-54

## Summary

In Chapter 49, Elena's summer is wrapped up in her job taking the little girls to the beach, and having Antonio as a boyfriend. She experiments with him sexually, mainly because she wants to keep up with what Lila may be doing with Stefano, but also because she remembered a shameful bit of pleasant feeling the night Donato Saratorre assaulted her. One day at the beach she sees Lila and Stefano. Lila tells Elena that she loves Stefano very much, more than anyone except her. At the end of the day, Antonio insinuates that Stefano and Lila throw their money around, and that he and Elena are 'more refined.'

In Chapter 50, Elena realizes that while she originally saw Antonio as a placeholder, she's actually growing fond of him. But by the end of the summer she feels she must end it with him, because her fondness isn't love, and she has done several sexual things with him she feels she shouldn't do because of that. However, whenever she feels ready to end it with him, her courage fails. One morning Elena sees Donato Saratorre on the street. He tells her he missed her that summer, and asks to see her in private, the next day. She forcefully tells him no, but then tells Antonio about it so they can confront him about Melina. They see Donato and Antonio tells him to leave his mother alone. Elena is very proud of Antonio, and decides to stay with him until Lila's wedding, at least.

In Chapter 51, Elena recounts the fullness of Lila's wedding preparations. Lila and Stefano buy a new house, decide on a honeymoon just by Naples, and deal with each other's families. The shoe shop is still a source of tension. Stefano tells Lila's brother and father that he wants to see a display ready for the Christmas shopping season. Elena asks Lila if she has experimented sexually with Stefano, and Lila, surprised, says no. They will wait until they are married. At this news Elena feels ashamed.

Chapter 52 opens with a wedding crisis. Lila is having difficulty with Stefano's mother and sister about several matters. Stefano takes Lila's whispered advice to hire a girl in the store so that his sister Pinuccia can work on the wedding. Lila recruits Elena to support her opinion on wedding details, the favors, cake, decorations, and especially the dress. Elena attends them to choose a wedding dress, and manages to sway the mother and sister with debate techniques she's learned in school. Lila is thrilled and asks to have Elena attend her on all such decisions.

Chapter 53 continues the trend of Elena helping Lila field her in-laws in wedding planning. She finds that Lila actually cares little for the actual details of the wedding; what she cares about is conceding so that once they're married, her in-laws will leave her alone. The wedding plans cause a decline in Elena's grades; furthermore, she opposes a teacher in religion class and receives a demerit. She is sent from the class, and in the hallway runs into Nino. She tells him what happened and he helps her. Word



travels, and she quickly becomes famous in her circles. Nino asks her to write about it for a newspaper he writes for. Elena is thrilled by the prospect of using her intellect to try to combat a wrong. She asks Lila to read her article; Lila helps with it, and then says not to bring her anything else because it hurts her.

In Chapter 54, Elena recopies the text with great excitement. Nino reads it and sadly tells her that she writes better than him. For a few days, Nino sulks about this, and Elena is angry. By the time he comes out of it and speaks to her again, she refuses to talk to him. She asks Antonio to walk with her so she can show Nino that she has a boyfriend.

## Analysis

These chapters are a refreshing turn because the girls are unified against a common 'enemy': Stefano's mother and sister. It is nice to see Lila need Elena again, and compliment her on how her education has given her excellent people skills. The reader here sees Lila's ability to manipulate—not Elena, but her in-laws—and is caught up in Lila's finally achieving what she's grasped all along: independence. Lila is willing to allow her in-laws to choose every detail of her wedding, if it means shutting them out of deciding the rest of her life. This book ends with the wedding, but the series continues with a second book, and the reader will be intrigued at what Lila's marriage will be like.

Elena's odd relationship with Antonio is detailed in these chapters. She allowed it to begin because he is older, like Stefano, not a boy, although he is not as prestigious as Stefano. Elena still can't tell her parents about him. She allows their physical relationship to proceed because she believes Lila to be doing the same, and she wishes to experience the same things as Lila. This development is perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the symbiotic friendship. Furthermore, when Elena asks Lila 'how far' she has gone with Stefano, she is surprised at the answer: they are waiting until marriage. Now, the idea of doing such things with Antonio loses their luster.

In Chapter 53 the reader sees Elena step into a new role. As a girl who has spent much of the story mainly supporting others and obeying, she stands up to a religion professor and gets herself thrown from class. The resulting reconnection with Nino and article about the event actually thrill her and fill her with purpose. Her education has taught her well, and the pleasure she receives from writing the article shows. When she lets Lila read it, she says it hurts her, and the reader remembers how bright Lila was when she was a child, and how Maestra Oliviera said that all of the beauty and fire inside Lila went into her looks. Lila, beautifully dressed, the most loved and envied young woman in the neighborhood, can't stand to see the beautiful words her friend has written, can't stand to get into the debate Elena has started. The memories are too painful.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Elena manage the conflict about the wedding dress?





## Discussion Question 2

Describe the confusion Elena feels about Nino and his father.

## Discussion Question 3

Are Elena's motives for being in a relationship with Antonio appropriate for the time in which this story is set? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

rancorous, dowry, friction, bristled, conciliatory, expulsion, vexation, superfluous, demerit, conviction, aggressive, shadowy, adversaries, concise, expiated



# Adolescence: 55-60

## Summary

In Chapter 55, Elena asks Antonio to come to the wedding with her; she is afraid of losing Lila after the wedding, and she needs him to help her feel pretty and accomplished. Lila has invited the entire neighborhood. Antonio takes this as a sign that Elena was ready to cement things with him, and goes into debt to make a good showing at the wedding. Fernando and Rino work nonstop and produce a ton of shoes, but Stefano is displeased with them if they don't look exactly like the pictures Lila draws. A fight ensues. Lila sides with her father, Rino with Stefano. Eventually Stefano gives in, and the shoes are displayed in the window. Christmas comes and goes and none of them sell.

In Chapter 56, Rino is depressed at the supposed failure of the shoes, but Lila is optimistic. They discuss strategies for widening their clientele. Lila asks Elena to visit their old teacher together, to invite her to the wedding. When Maestra Oliviero answers the door, she sees Lila in her fine clothes and says, "I know Cerullo, I don't know this girl."

This hurts Lila deeply. Furthermore, when she presses Stefano on who will be the speech master at their wedding, he is evasive for a time, finally telling her that he's secured Silvio Solara. She is angry, refuses to see Stefano, and shuts herself in her room a day. Her family pleads with her to have the shoes put into different stores about the city, they need Solara's approval. Only Elena is able to convince her, after for one moment toying with the possibility of turning her mind the other way. Thanks to Elena, Lila comes around, making Stefano promise that Marcello will not be at the wedding.

In Chapter 57, Elena is helping Lila prepare for the wedding. Lila makes Elena promise that she'll continue in school: she even offers to pay for it, so that she can be the best of the neighborhood. Elena helps wash Lila before she puts her dress on, and she experiences an odd type of admiration at Lila's body; more specifically, for the eventuality that she will lose her virginity sometime that evening. The intimacy of the act, one in which Elena can't take part, causes her great pain. She feels she must combat it by losing her virginity as well.

Chapter 58 sees the wedding getting underway. Elena describes the whole neighborhood watching happily. Lila and Stefano exchange vows and rings with no drama. And then Nino appears. In Chapter 59, the wedding moves on to the reception. It seems Alfonso, Stefano's brother was dating Marisa, Nino's sister, and had asked them both to his brother's wedding. He and Elena exchange greetings, and she has to extricate herself from Antonio's public grasp to stay near Nino. Elena rides to the reception with the neighborhood boys, and for the first time, feels a separation from them, that her education is wasted in their conversations. She desires, suddenly, to be away from the vulgar youths, to elevate herself and her speech.



In Chapter 60, Elena has to field the many intricate relationships at the reception. Antonio wants to cling to her. She wants to talk to Nino. Her mother sees her with Antonio and is furious because he's only a mechanic; she forces Elena to sit with her. Elena's feeling of being out of place is magnified. She feels she must escape from the neighborhood world as not even Lila has been able to. Nino enters the reception hall, and Elena wrenches herself from her mother and walks straight towards him.

## Analysis

The climax of the story arrives in a storm of family drama. First, there is a problem with the shoes. Fernando hasn't made them according to Lila's drawings, and so Stefano doesn't like them. The reader overhears Stefano tell Rino that it wasn't just 'for love of your sister' that he invested in the shoes—he wants to see a return in the form of some sales. And so the dominoes begin to fall—in order to get the shoes in other stores, they need the approval of the Solaras. The wedding is nearly off when Lila finds out. What is ironic here is that, for all of her intelligence and scheming and beauty, Lila is still subject to the rules of the neighborhood. She and Stefano felt themselves 'above' the Solaras, but in the end, they needed them for the shoe business to succeed.

Elena sees this truth as she watches the wedding reception, for all of Lila's superior qualities, she hasn't escaped. She has always wanted freedom and independence, and she doesn't have it. Elena feels the force of this epiphany after riding with the neighborhood boys, Antonio among them, from the church to the reception. Their coarse talk upsets her. Her mother grasping at her in the reception hall, too—Elena remembers her accomplishments, her classes, her high scores, her praises—these propel her with confidence across the reception hall, away from her mother, Antonio, and Lila, towards Nino.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Elena convince Lila to forgive Stefano?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the irony surrounding the Cerullo family's partnership with the Solaras in the shoe business.

## Discussion Question 3

Describe Lila's feelings going into her wedding.

## Vocabulary

dissonant, harmony, sugary, fiasco, breadth, intrusions, provenance, grossly, penetrated, tumultuous



# Adolescence: 61-62

## Summary

In Chapter 61, Elena sits by Nino, shooing Antonio away. The reception is going poorly, people are murmuring about the state of the food, but Elena ignores it and draws Nino into conversation. They talk for a long time, and Elena is ashamed at how she's treated him. She loves their intellectual talk. She wants Nino to take her away from the neighborhood. Antonio interrupts and asks her to dance. They dance as Elena watches the wedding guests. Antonio is angry at her that she's spent the evening talking to Nino, and leaves her alone on the dance floor. She hovers for a moment between joining Nino and going after Antonio. Deciding it would be easier for Antonio to break it off with her, she returns to Nino and tries to regain their conversation. She asks about the paper for which she'd written the article: Nino tells her they'd left her piece out.

In Chapter 62, Elena feels the weight of disappointment. She'd seen her article as a way to elevate herself above her friends, her family, and in the end it had amounted to nothing. She looks around at the guests and is ashamed at the display of filth, dirt, clawing humanity. Nino abruptly gets up to leave; Elena envies his ability to leave the neighborhood so easily. He leaves, and Elena feels that he takes with him her ability to elevate herself. The doors to the hall open and the Solara brothers appear, well-dressed and confident. Lila is furious, but everyone else is easy. Marcello sits at the table and loosens his tie, crossing his legs. Elena and Lila notice at the same time—Marcello is wearing THE shoes. The ones she and Rino made for months, the ones Stefano bought when he asked her father if he could marry her.

## Analysis

These last two chapters are mainly concerned with Elena's epiphany concerning the neighborhood: of her desire to leave it. This she wraps up in conversation with Nino. Ignoring her mother and Antonio, she talks of politics and poverty with Nino, idealizing him and what he represents: the same independence and freedom from her circumstances that Lila craves. In an instant her upbringing is clear to her, and to Nino, who leaves without saying goodbye.

Elena is bereft, seeing in his departure her last chance at freedom. She doubts her education will be a vehicle for her. She is back to the low point in the seesaw: as Lila is elevated to marriage she has sunk low.

The book ends with the appearance of Marcello and Michele, who Lila had forbidden to come. The author leaves hanging the implication of Marcello wearing the shoes that Stefano had bought from her father.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Elena's thoughts when she looks around the room, recalling the word 'plebs.'

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are the implications of Marcello's appearance, wearing the original Cerullo shoes?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Has Elena lost her chance with Nino? With Antonio? Whom does she prefer?

## **Vocabulary**

plebs, contaminated, vulgar



# Characters

## Elena Greco

Elena, or Lenu, or Lenuccia, is the narrator of the story. In the beginning of the story she is six years old, and the novel takes the reader through her sixteenth year. She is upper-lower class, because her father serves as a porter in a fancy hotel in Naples. Early on she is identified as an excellent student, and is driven to do her best because of the direct competition with Lila. When Lila stops attending school, Elena continues and excels in school. She is Lila's best friend, but they are not close because Lila doesn't accept that type of closeness. For the course of the story, Elena feels competitive towards - yet attached - to Lila, whose own accomplishments drive Elena's need for success.

Elena struggles constantly with her attractiveness and her identity. There is tension throughout the novel on whether or not she wishes to be an intellectual - although she is very intelligent and tends towards this, she has no outlet for intellectual discussions. The farther removed from school Lila gets, the less she is interested in intelligent things, and so Elena feels she is going the educational route alone. The other girls of the neighborhood focus on being pretty and flirtatious, and Elena doesn't feel she is equal to their charms, so she studies. In the very end of the story, she feels blinders drop from her eyes and sees the neighborhood as an intellectual would - poor, uneducated, plebeian. She makes a promise to herself to finish school.

At times Elena's envy of Lila causes some startling thought patterns in Elena - thoughts of sabotage, dishonesty, and triumph over Lila's defeats. The reader wonders if she's actually a good friend, even compared to the icy extreme of Lila.

## Lila Cerullo

Raffaella, or Lila, is the daughter of the local shoemaker. Her family is characterized by stress and violence, and they are on the lower rungs of their class. Lina's parents do not value education, and they send her to the free elementary school, where she distinguishes herself as a brilliant student, but when she is old enough to enter middle school, her parents can't pay for it, so she is forced into inaction. Lila is a person completely present in her own mind, who watched everything going on around her and schemes to achieve her goals within the confines of her family and place in society. She loves Elena, but loves her from a distance. She is completely successful at everything she tries to do and is adored and admired by everyone who meets her.

Throughout the story, the reader gets only small glimpses into Lila's thoughts. Because Elena is the first-person narrator of the novel, Lila is viewed in terms of how she treats Elena. And this treatment varies. She is at times solicitous and dismissive of Elena's attention. She is envious of Elena's education, but often dismisses Elena's attempts to



have an intellectual conversation. Lila appears to be a deep thinker and meticulous planner, and thinks on a macro level about the neighborhood and its inhabitants. She is weak only where her parents are concerned - for them, she will allow herself to be courted, will allow the shoes to be traded.

It is the author's skill that shows Lila's complexities without being inside of her head. The reader can only see her words and reactions, and still can see what a layered character she is. Loved, feared, passionate, cool, loyal, cold, calculating, and at times brutal, she really is the heart of the story.

## **Rino Cerullo**

Rino is Lila's older brother, a hot-headed, passionate individual who plans and schemes and dreams, and falls into a deep depression when these things don't come to pass. He is perhaps Lila's closest confidante, as Elena can't be, because Rino is her own brother who understands her and is trapped in the same socio-economic level as she. Rino is prone to fits of depression and is unstable while Lila is prone to remaining calm and collected. Like Lila, he is a social climber, but he lacks her intellect and planning. Other than his sometime loyalty to his sister, and even that is undependable, he is a character lacking in many desirable character traits.

## **Don Achille Carracci**

Don Achille is the 'don' of the neighborhood, the unspoken leader and much feared for his connections to Communism and the black market. Early in the story, the girls bond over a dare to enter his home. He is a shadowy, ephemeral character. During their childhood, he is murdered, supposedly freeing the neighborhood of his tyrannical reign. Later in the timeline, his son Stefano rises to prominence as the neighborhood grocer, and successfully courts Lila. Although the girls never personally witness the violence and terror that Don Achille wreaks on the neighborhood, it is always rumored; and when Lila later allows his son Stefano to court her, the reader wonders if the son will begin to mirror the traits of his father.

## **Marcello Solara**

Marcello Solara is the son of the owner of the pastry shop. Throughout the story he is a symbol of wealth and prosperity; he and his brother, Michele, are always mentioned in conjunction with the blue convertible they drive around the neighborhood. They are also dangerous individuals, set directly against the Carracci family in the battle for control of the neighborhood. He is a bully, flush with money but short on respectable qualities. The brothers show little respect to the girls of the neighborhood, appearing to use them and trade them out at will. He unsuccessfully attempts to court Lila for a time, treating her family to gifts and thin charm, but Lila eventually refuses his proposal. Only in this courtship does Marcello show any real or true feeling, but the reader may wonder if it is Lila's status as a cool, unreachable beauty that inspires this devotion.





## Nino Sarratore

In a swath of broadly drawn neighborhood characters, Nino Sarratore stands out for the reader and for Elena. The son of a railroad worker-turned-published poet, Nino is two years older and a seeming world away from Elena. He is intelligent and sensitive and thoughtful and passionate about books and politics and issues. He is not motivated by the 'petty' concerns of the neighborhood. He does not play the same game as the local boys; this is largely because early in the story his family is moved out of 'the neighborhood' and given a home owned by the railroad company. This happens when Elena is 7 years old, shortly after Nino corners her in the alley and asks if she will marry him someday. She wants to say yes but can't - and this propensity to be tongue-tied with Nino is a prevalent theme. Elena carries a helpless love for him for most of the story.

## Maestra Oliviero

Oliviero is the elementary school teacher for Elena and Lina when they are young. She encourages both of them and sees brilliance in both of them, and even promotes some friendly competition to get the best out of each girl. As they grow, she helps Elena get into the upper levels of school, secure the funding she needs to attend, and also loans her the relevant textbooks. Late in the story, the old teacher sees Lila and is shocked that she has become a fashionable young woman. This causes her to mourn the loss of the brilliant young girl whose family didn't value her proceeding in school.

## Stefano Carracci

Stefano makes his first appearance when Lila, at age seven, beats his younger brother Alfonso at the elementary school competition and he attempts to either hurt or scare Lila for revenge. Later, when his father Don Achille is murdered, Stefano becomes the owner of the grocery, and by all accounts a fine, upstanding young man. He becomes important when the girls are about fifteen, when he begins to court Lila, and compete with the Solaras for her affection. Although his courtship of Lila fares better than Stefano's, and early on Lila promises him that she "won't be bought," the reader begins to see hints of what the marriage will be like. Stefano is smooth and ingratiating, but his manners hide a hard businessman who won't be challenged by the whims of his wife. Right before the wedding, he goes behind Lila's back to ally himself with the Solaras showing that he's not as kind hearted as Lila may have surmised.

## Carmela Peluso

The Peluso's father is the man who was accused and condemned for murdering Don Achille. Thus, the Peluso family is marked for the rest of the story. Carmela plays the sometimes third wheel to Elena and Lila's friendship, but Elena feels like she is a better and more important friend than Carmela. Carmela grows up to be less accomplished



and more silly than Elena and Lila, but they do all grow up together and experience the changes and challenges of adolescence as a trio.

## Donato Saratorre

Donato Saratorre is the railway worker who befriended the widowed Melina, a relative of Lila's mother Nunzia. After Melina has very well fallen for Saratorre, his wife Lidia caused a scene in the neighborhood, accusing them of having an affair. Although it was denied, it was clear that Melina had fallen for Saratorre and that the feeling was possibly mutual. The theory is borne out later in the story, long after the Saratorre family moves out of the neighborhood, when Donato has a book of poems actually published, and they are dedicated to Melina. The story of this pair is important because the fate of Melina, who maybe gave herself to a man without a promise, is a cautionary tale for the young girls not to fall in love.

Donato, for his part, is kind of a legend, as a published poet and someone who actually left the neighborhood. Donato also resurfaces in Lila's life when she spends the summer at Ischia. Against his son Nino's better judgement, Elena finds Donato a kind and agreeable man; the Saratorre family in general showing a happier face than her family usually does. However, the last night of her summer visit to Ischia, Donato sexually assaults her, causing a host of confusing emotions and tying shame and embarrassment to Nino for the foreseeable future.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Shoes

Lila's family are shoemakers, and midway through the novel she and her brother Rino decide they are going to make a newly-designed, innovative pair of shoes that will become their vehicle towards financial freedom. For both of the siblings, the shoes represent a way out of their little-respect, lower class existence, and also the ability to do and create something amazing.

## Car

This novel is filled with characters that 'have not,' and when a character does 'have,' they are lent a sense of power and otherness over the rest of the cast. The Solara brothers are mentioned repeatedly—driving around the neighborhood in their blue coupe—and often they are mentioned in tandem with an ugly wielding of their social position. Later in the story, Stefano Carucci also gets a car, and while on the surface he is a kinder, gentler version of the Solaras, by the end of the novel the reader learns he is equal to them in manipulation and using his power and wealth to get what he wants.

## Education

In the time and place during which this novel happens, education is not looked on with the same level of purpose and respect. Many of the characters—such as Enzo, the young man who runs the grocery cart—is seen as intelligent and respectable, but like Lila, he didn't move past elementary school. Lila is widely recognized as brilliant, but wasn't able to finish school either. Elena, on the other hand, and her schoolmates Alfonso and Antonio, are by the end of the novel in high school. Elena is actually one of the top students in the school. And yet, they command little respect in comparison to their less-educated counterparts. And even though this is true, education is a status for the adults in the neighborhood. The middle-aged adults lift up Elena's education, but at the time the story is set, education didn't carry the power it does today.

## Attractiveness

It is common for young people to value and rank their peers based on their appearance, but the narrator, Elena, is seemingly consumed by it. When she develops earlier than Lila and the other girls, she uses her adolescent shape as a bar that Lila has not yet reached. Later, her hourglass figure turns to a larger shape than she desires, and she gets acne, and it is a constant source of stress for her. Lila, on the other hand, has grown tall and willowy, and shows beauty through confidence and intelligence. Feeling less attractive than Lila is a source of envy for Elena throughout the course of the story. Several times she mentions feeling better about herself because she looks good, or



feels thin, or is tan, or has a clear face. Although this is normal for the adolescent phase of life, the narrator of this novel is clearly focused on attractiveness in her and in others.

## The neighborhood

'The neighborhood'—actually some small section of Naples, Italy—is the center of the universe for Elena and Lila. School is in the neighborhood, also Stefano's grocery and Enzo's vegetable cart and the Cerullo's shoe shop. All of the people they know live in the neighborhood, a microcosm for the world and their own reality. When the Sarratorre family moves away—really just two streets over—when Elena is eight, it's as if they have left for another country. A few times in the story, when the main characters are teens, they leave the neighborhood and visit Naples proper, and it's as if they've stepped into another world. In Prologue, the reader already knows that, at age sixty, Elena lives far away in Turin, but Lila has stayed in Naples and never left. By the end of the novel, when Lila is age sixteen, she is married, a queen, and the neighborhood is her kingdom.

## The sea

'The sea' is an elusive metaphor for the world outside the neighborhood. The girls live in a small section of Naples, and Naples is on the water, but their homes are located too far inside the city to be able to see it. Early in the story the girls skip school in an attempt to walk to the sea, but they are waylaid by hunger, thirst, and a rainstorm. Later in the story, Elena is granted an opportunity to stay on an island for a month, and her chance to leave the neighborhood and travel what really only amounted to about ten miles is akin to a pilgrimage. And truly, during her month on the island of Ischia, she is like a different person, and returns home changed. The characters talk of the sea as if it's a world away, rather than a mile or two. For the reader, this separation further represents how close and removed 'the neighborhood' is from the world, physically and otherwise.

## Family

The reader can tell from reading the 'cast of characters' on the first page of the novel that in this story, one's family is their kingdom. 'The neighborhood' is separated into families. Each family has an identity and occupies a particular step on the social and economic ladder. And within each family, loyalty is key. Several times in the story, violence erupts between families because one member was slighted, and fights occur to try to right the wrongs. Even when Lila's brother Rino does things that compromise her or her parents, she is loyal to her brother and supportive of his actions, rather than be seen as speaking against him. When Don Achille is murdered, there are two families that could take his position as the head of the neighborhood, and each family must declare loyalty to one or the other.



## Elena's silver bracelet

When Elena does very well on her school exams, her mother, with whom she has never felt close, offers to loan her a silver bracelet. Elena mentions this bracelet whenever she talks of wanting to be attractive. When her attractiveness is a question to her, she plays with it nervously. When she and Lila are approached by the Solaras' for the first time, she is wearing it, and it gives her confidence to speak to the Solaras' boldly. Immediately Marcello grasps her hand and the bracelet breaks. Only after Lila threatens him does he fix it for Elena. Throughout the novel, this bracelet is always mentioned in conjunction with feeling pretty.

## Books

In this story, books are a vehicle of power, one of the main themes in the novel. When they are young, the girls purchase 'Little Women' and read it over and over again, vowing to write their own book so they can sell it for money. The books are always at issue in Elena's schooling, she has to use secondhand copies from her old teacher, and so feels second rate. Lila checks books out from the library, often taking the books Elena needs for school and reading them herself so she can metaphorically steal the knowledge Elena needs to succeed. And finally, Donato Saratorre writes his feelings in a book of poetry that is published. The book is a weapon against his wife, a balm for Melina, and yet is also the way the Saratorre family gains fame and fortune.

## Clothing

Elena is always noticing what people are wearing. From early in the story, she notes that Lila wears the same shabby dress every day. Stefano, although the wealthiest boy in the neighborhood, is usually clad in 'a greasy apron.' When Lila is engaged to Stefano, she begins to dress like a fashion model and her beauty rivals even the fanciest women in Naples. It's nothing new under the sun that clothing determines a person's status, or renders them either appealing or not. What is interesting is that Elena, resident of one place, a neighborhood of relative poverty where everybody is underdressed, everybody wears the same dress for days, ranks the people she meets according to their clothing.



# Settings

## 'The neighborhood'

The neighborhood is an indeterminate section of Naples, Italy, in the late 1950s. The reader knows it's relatively close to the sea, and that Elena's father is an easy bus ride to Naples proper, where he is a porter in a nice hotel. However, the bulk of the action takes place in a small section of streets, where the five to six key families live, where they shop together and go to church together and dream together. During this time in history, a neighborhood like the one depicted in this novel is the center of the universe. All of the families in the story had been born, lived, and died on the small streets, and to move away from the neighborhood was akin to a cross-country journey.

## School

Elena spends much of her time at school. Early in the novel she attends the local elementary school. As she grows older, she attends the non-compulsory, tuition and test score driven middle school, and later still, she is invited to attend high school, which is in Naples proper and requires a bus route. The high school is, as her mother says, 'where the rich kids go,' and for Elena it is a world apart. School is her one place that's away from the neighborhood, and though her status in school is elevated due to her good grades, her status in the neighborhood is driven by good looks and boyfriends.

## Ischia

Ischia is an island off the coast of Naples, a vacation spot in the Mediterranean Sea. Elena is invited to visit Ischia by her teacher, Maestra Oliviera, to stay with her sister there. Elena spends a month there one summer when she is fifteen. There, away from Lila and the neighborhood, Elena blossoms. She grows tan, loses weight, reads interesting books, and swims in the sea. She feels a self apart from the Elena that lives in the neighborhood. It is only when she receives one single letter from Lila that her new identity crumbles, because her tie to Lila is so strong she feels that an identity built apart from her friend isn't worth having.

## Elena's house in Turin

In the Prologue of the novel, Elena is in her home in Turin, far north of Naples in the Italian Alps. The reader only sees a snippet of this life, some sixty years in the future from when the girls first meet. The author uses this prologue to tease the reader: why is Elena so far away? Why is Lila still in Naples? Why does Lila's son, Rino, call Elena for news of his mother? The fact that Elena lives so far away from their home neighborhood is key. The reader's curiosity is piqued to learn what occurs in the long years in between.



## Naples

Several times in the story, the characters take the bus into the city of Naples to eat at a pizzeria or walk around the fountains. In one of these trips to the city, Elena feels far removed from the other residents—she feels under dressed, poor, and slovenly, compared to the regular youths of Naples. The boys feel similarly, and in one part of the story, a fight erupts between the boys of 'the neighborhood,' and the wealthy, well dressed boys of Naples proper. This event demonstrates another way that 'the neighborhood' is a world away from the rest of the city.



# Themes and Motifs

## Elena's Dependence on Lila

As the narrator, Elena even mentions several times throughout the story how when she feels up, Lila is down, and vice versa. Elena will feel happy and confident about the path her life is taking only in relation to how Lila's is doing.

When Elena is accepted to high school, Lila is struggling with family problems and a lack of direction and motivation. School, something Lila envies, provides a productive outlet for Elena and gives her pleasure, but while she is excelling, Lila is floundering. When Lila finds something that motivates her and makes her happy, Elena grows envious and falls into a slump.

At her happiest, after the summer on the island of Ischia, Elena feels pretty and slim and has enjoyed a new life of different experiences. For six weeks she lives in blissful ignorance because Lila has not answered her letters. When at last Lila answers her letter, relaying her drama with Marcello Solara in very eloquent speech, all of confidence Elena has gained dissipates. Elena, and to a lesser extent Lila, is unable to evaluate her life solely on its merits, it must be compared to Lila's.

When Lila begins her courtship with Stefano, Elena cannot compete with an engagement to a wealthy, older man, so she falls into a depression, falling short on her studies for a time, and filling the perceived emptiness with encouraging the attention of young men she isn't really attracted to.

The ebb and flow of this relationship is the main crux of the story. The reader may at times wonder if this is a healthy relationship, and then at times see themselves in the very natural and human feelings of envy and jealousy. And yet even in their competition with each other, the girls are dependent on each other, and for the most part, loyal. When the neighborhood turns on Lila after she is engaged to Stefano, only Elena will come to her defense.

## Violence

For these young people growing up in the 1950s, violence was a way of life. In their families, it was common for the father to beat the children for the smallest of infractions: the reader witnesses a scene with Lila is actually thrown out of the window of her apartment onto the lawn below: she breaks a wrist in the process. There are several detailed, raw depictions of beatings, and even a rooftop shooting is commonplace. Common conversations between married couples devolve into shouting matches. There are very few calm discussions.

The author uses these scenes to further depict the chaotic nature of the setting. There is very little going on in the story that is rote and routine and dependable. Many of the





events in the plot cause destruction and a domino of violence due to reprisals and revenge. Their lives are fraught with drama, and so the characters themselves are dramatic: Lila, the belle of the neighborhood with her fierce intelligence. Elena, who is at times fiercely jealous and and fiercely protective of her friend. The Solara brothers, who drive around in their fancy car and take whatever young lady pleases them: all of these portraits are etched with no-holds-barred emotion, and their high color lends depth to the story that may otherwise be just a story of a small Italian town after the war.

At the height of Elena's adolescence - her 6 week stay on the resort island of Ischia - she suffers a sexual assault by Donato Saratorre. This is a shocking plot development because Donato, while rumored in the neighborhood to be a lecher and much disliked by Nino, had made himself agreeable to Elena and the reader throughout the summer visit. His treatment of Elena is a startling, a message from the author that the perfect idyll of the summer could not be without drama.

For the modern reader, this lifestyle and way of life may be surprising, but the author is painting a colorful portrait with memorable people, all motivated by emotion and not reason.

## Parental Obedience/Disobedience

Family strife is a regular part of this story. Perhaps it was the time in which the story takes place, or the small neighborhood, or the Latin culture; in any case, there are regular allusions to family violence in every chapter.

For Elena to attend school, every year is a battle between her, her mother, and her father as they volley words about prestige and books and tuition. Each year, her father supports her over her mother. Each year, her mother swears she won't allow another year of schooling, and then she does. Elena must wait to see what her parents will say. For Lila's part, her parents refuse outright at the end of elementary school, despite Lila's brilliance and promise and the teacher's urging. For months Lila swears she will find a way to attend middle school. Her brother Rino fights and argues on her behalf. Lila tells her friends she's certainly going, no matter what her parents say. Yet in the end, school starts, her parents stand firm, and Lila doesn't go to school.

In the matter of the shoes, Lila and Rino, both teenagers at the time, do something that by most views is a good thing, designing and creating a pair of shoes that they hope will sell and increase prestige for the Cerullo name. Early on they ask their father to expand, as the neighborhood is growing and the economy is increasing. Lila senses this, but her father is set in his ways and refuses. Despite the fact that they know better and can find a way to make money, Lila and Rino obey their father, only making a new set of shoes behind his back. The whole time they work on the shoes they fear him. When he sees them, he hates them, and despite the fact that the shoes are worth trying to duplicate and sell, they cannot, because they don't have their father's blessing.



Early on, Elena says that Lila has a way of doing what she pleases while making you think she's obeyed, and so it is with her courtships. Both Marcello and Stefano court her; she wishes to marry the latter and not the former, but must work within the confines of her parents' wishes. Eventually she manages to manipulate her parents into choosing Stefano over Marcello, and she is able to get what she wants while still appearing to obey her parents.

## Power

Everyone in this story is searching for some semblance of power. The ways to gain and wield power are varied depending on the character: Lila at different times in the story uses her intelligence, her looks, and her ferocity. The Solara brothers use their wealth. Stefano uses both his wealth and his family name as the son of Don Achille. Elena would like to use her looks, but as she feels she is not pretty enough, she uses her loyalty and her availability. Rino uses his hot-blooded emotion. The fathers use their physical strength. Many of the events in this novel can be boiled down to an attempt to keep or shift the balance of power between families, between individuals, or between hopeless situations.

When Lila is engaged to Stefano, she is suddenly the most powerful young woman in the neighborhood. At the age of sixteen, she is the most attractive person on the street, the one that the men desire and the girls desire to be. Due to her own intelligent scheming and good looks, she has made Stefano fall in love with her. Suddenly she is the wealthiest and best dressed girl in the neighborhood. She rides around in Stefano's car and wears nicer clothing than anybody she knows. His wealth and her confidence has given her power to rise above the circumstances of her birth.

As another example, when Lila and Elena are children, both are encouraged to apply to the middle school, but Lila's parents refuse because they can't afford the tuition. Elena's parents can, so she studies for the entrance exam and prepares to go to school. This occurs just after the girls are old enough to begin to feel competition towards one another. Lila feels she is lower than Elena because she doesn't have the money to go to school, so she finds ways to elevate herself. Elena realizes that, in being granted the opportunity to complete her higher degree, she will always have the edge on Lila, so she uses it to feel her own power over her friend.

As the girls move through adolescence, Elena realizes that Lila surpasses her in looks, confidence, and intelligence, so Elena makes a move to align herself with Lila, using her loyalty towards Lila to distinguish herself from the others in neighborhood. If she can not surpass Lila, she will ally herself with the girl, and so share in the power that way. It's a mercenary view of friendship, but the novel pulls no punches when describing the motivations and hearts of humanity.



## Wealth

The lines between lower, middle, and upper class are sharply drawn in this story. For the Cerullo family—the shoemakers with a one-room establishment—the reader wonders how they even pay their bills and make ends meet. Lila's inability to pay the tuition for schooling past age nine is a huge upheaval considering how intelligent she is; and late in the novel their elementary teacher proclaims that it was the moment that Lila's life went wrong.

Elena's father is a porter in a Naples hotel, so her family is better off. At the very least, she is able to afford middle school and high school and take a trip to the beach for a month. Many times, the reader can see that Elena is better off, but at the same time, Elena spends much of the story dealing with envy towards the less-fortunate Lila. The author uses this dichotomy to reinforce the adage that money can't buy everything, and that sometimes people long for things they can't attain through a better job.

Likewise, the Solara family owns the pastry and coffee shop; the young men are well dressed, attractive, and drive an actual automobile through the neighborhood, a rare thing in their time and place. And yet, neither of the brothers are able to obtain simple happiness. In this novel, neither of them gain the affections of the girl they truly want, and the reader sees both of them vying after power and respect that their high position in the town will not grant on its own.

# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view in this novel is exclusively Elena's. It is written in first person, and often, the reader may wonder how Elena knows what may have occurred during an event in which she did not take part. There is some suspension on the reader's part here, as they must assume that she was present, or that the events were simply related to her. At other points, she author does a good job of not discussing certain things, for example, the physical relationship between Lila and Stefano, because she isn't with them when they're alone together. Because the story is written from Elena's perspective, the events are filtered through her own prejudice and attachment to Lila, and her own wishes and desires in comparison to Lila's successes.

## Language and Meaning

This novel is translated from the original Italian, and the sentences are sometimes halting. At other times, they are almost esoteric in their use of language. There are many beautiful phrases and high-level vocabulary, but when the author seeks to describe Elena's thought processes, her descriptions are often lofty, as Elena herself is a highly complex character. This novel is deep and raw and holds nothing back, and much of the language seeks to convey this truth of life in their small neighborhood in the 1950s.

## Structure

The novel is separated into three sections. First is the Prologue, which takes place when Lila and Elena are elderly. During this section the reader becomes quickly acquainted with Lila's complex thought process, and her need to disappear from her life—a foreshadowing of Lila's outlook on life. The next section is Childhood, which consists of eighteen short chapters, detailing the early parts of their friendship and their time in elementary school. The longest section is that concerning adolescence, for sixty-six chapters, taking the reader through the sixteenth year.



## Quotes

At the 4th flight Lila did something unexpected. She stopped to wait for me, and when I reached her she gave me her hand. This gesture changed everything between us forever.

-- Elena (chapter 1 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote is important because it happens early in the story, when two young, lonely girls cement their friendship during a scary point in their lives. They grip hands to do the scary thing together, and throughout the novel Elena and Lila stay best friends in their own way.

Adults, waiting for tomorrow, move in a present behind which is yesterday or the day before yesterday or at most last week: they don't want to think about the rest. Children don't know the meaning of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, or even of tomorrow. Everything is this, now: the street is this, the doorway is this, the stairs are this, this is Mamma, this is Papa, this is the day, this is the night.

-- Elena (chapter 2 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This quote captures the essence of Elena and Lila's childhood, and really, the impulsiveness that will characterize Lila throughout the novel. For both girls, but particularly Lila, there is very little thought for the future; there is only what suits her desire at that moment.

With these words and those years I bring back the many fears that accompanied me all my life.

-- Elena (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Elena is the narrator and the main character of the novel, the eyes and ears of the happenings of her small Naples neighborhood. However, many of the happenings in the story are filtered through Elena's insecurities, and this quote foreshadows the fears that will motivate her actions throughout the story.

Although she was fragile in appearance, every prohibition lost substance in her presence. She knew how to go beyond the limit without ever truly suffering the consequences. In the end people gave in, and were even, however unwillingly, compelled to praise her."

-- Elena (chapter 13 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote crystallizes Lila's outrageous personality. Although she is forced to work within the confines of her family, her socio-economic status, and the local customs, Lila always seems to come out on top, and always be able to get what she wants out of a situation.

I, and Lila, we two with that capacity that together—only together—we had to seize the mass of colors, sounds, things, and people, and express it and give it power.



-- Elena (chapter 14 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote is the first of many representations of Elena's attachment to Lila. The reader will see that Elena can't seem to grasp her own life experiences without filtering them through Lila. As they get older, Elena will only enjoy school and friendships and boyfriends by comparing them to what is happening to Lila.

And yet I had now a single true thought—to find a boyfriend, immediately, before Lila announced that she was going with Pasquale.

-- Elena (chapter 18 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This quote is the first time that Elena feels desperate to have a boyfriend only because she thinks Lila might have a boyfriend. Although the girls are friends, there is also a comparison and contest that drives Elena's actions. Throughout the story, she takes on a couple of boyfriends that she doesn't really love, but keeps around only so she can keep up with Lila's love life.

...only what Lila touched became important.

-- Elena (chapter 5 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The story is driven by Lila's rise through society in the neighborhood, and Elena close by, as a spectator and a competitor, who wants to do everything that Lila does.

School...stopped being a kind of adventure and had become only a thing that I knew how to do well and was much praised for.

-- Elena (chapter 25 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Elena continues to shine as a student throughout the story. However, as she works through her studies year after year, she loses purpose for why she's there, and as Lila's life shows more and more drama, Elena's interest in school wanes.

Here everything is dangerous.

-- Rino (chapter 27)

**Importance:** This quote speaks to the constant turmoil and danger that characterizes 'the neighborhood,' with turf wars and the ultimate battle for Lila's affection, the main setting for this story is fraught with drama.

It was an old fear, a fear that has never left me: the fear that, in losing pieces of her life, mine lost intensity and importance.

-- Elena (chapter 30 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** With this quote the reader can see again that Elena filters all of the events in her life through what is happening to Lila. This quote appears in the novel when Elena is away for two months at the sea. During this time, many wonderful things happen to her, and she is happy with her life until she reads a single letter from Lila. In



Lila's letter she shares, in small detail, what is happening to her, and because Elena isn't there to experience it with her, the great events in Elena's own life begin to lose potency.

The beauty of mind that Cerullo had from childhood didn't find an outlet, Greco, and it all ended up in her face, in her breasts, in her eyes, in her ass, places where it soon fades, and it will be as if she never had it.

-- Maestro Oliviera (chapter 48 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote is said by the woman who taught Lila and Elena when they were elementary age students. In elementary school, Lila shone as a genius, but her parents couldn't afford to send her to school beyond those years. Here the teacher is lamenting the fact that Lila was never encouraged in her studies; in the teacher's opinion, Lila's intelligence has gone to waste. Instead of being praised for her brilliance, she has found success in life due to her great beauty, which, the teacher points out, will eventually fade.

The difference between you and me, always, has been that people are afraid of me and not of you.

-- Lila (chapter 52 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This quote is said to Elena by Lila, towards the end of the book, and crystallizes the mystique that surrounds Lila in the story. Throughout the novel Lila seems to get precisely what she wants, even that doesn't seem the case, and she admits that this is due to her amazing audacity and people's response to it. Elena can achieve through kindness, she goes on to say, what she never could, because she's not kind.